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ABSTRACT

Learning teams provide a tool to help students understand new material, enjoy the learning process, and benefit from the organizational structure of the learning environment. These teams are long term peer groupings of inservice teachers participating in a college class. The teams are developed through a six-point process: (1) students choose teams of four or five members; (2) students determine criteria for successful teamwork; (3) students read professional and content area literature in literature circles; (4) students use a team process writing approach for course assignments; (5) students use a number of strategies provided by the instructors for group interactions; and (6) students use teams for short daily discussion groups and peer teaching. Students have reported several benefits of working in learning teams: increased self-confidence as competent learners, increased learning due to the variety of perspectives on topics, increased motivation, increased participation, fewer inhibitions about participation, immediate peer feedback. The instructor adopts many roles within the context of this curricular structure, the most prominent being that of facilitator. (IAH)

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LEARNING TEAMS IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM: THE ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE REVISITED

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Lilly Conference on College Teaching in Oxford, Ohio, November, 1991

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Teachers at all levels are looking for new ways to help them accomplish their goals. They want to help students understand new material, enjoy the learning process and benefit from the organizational structure of the learning environment. Learning teams provide a tool to help accomplish these goals through a sense of group membership and ownership of the curriculum. The result is a classroom much like the one-room schoolhouse of the past in which students shared their knowledge in an ever-widening circle of learners/teachers.

Learning: Is It Individual or Communal?

Views of how learning occurs can either stifle or support our teaching practice. If learning is viewed as only a transmission of known objective facts, and learners are viewed as empty vessels to be filled, then there is no opportunity for the kind of dialogue which would open the floor to the valuing of multiple cultures and beliefs systems within a classroom. The teachers voice will dominate. Additionally, if this transmission of nowledge is accomplished through lecture, the individual will generally be responsible for only his or her own learning.

If on the other hand, learning is viewed as a construction process in which many voices share experiences and perspectives, and learners are viewed as bringing with them valuable ideas and thought patterns to be shared and refined by a group process, then many voices will be heard. This view of knowledge as constructed requires curriculum structures that not only support interaction, discussion, and debate, but also provide encouragement, nurturing and acceptance.

We are beginning to conceive of the learning environment as a workshop: one in which students seize opportunities to discuss their insights and problems with peers before they are addressed by the teacher. Many students do not realize the extent of the knowledge base they bring to a particular topic or how interactions with peers can help to expand and synthesize the the new information they are gleaning from sources available inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, many teachers do not realize the extent of this knowledge base. Even after they have experienced learning teams in our classes, inservice teachers still need time to operationalize social learning theory. One former student, a teacher of learning disabled students, said recently to us, "I had just decided that it (learning teams based on kids choices of topics to study) was not going to work, when suddenly it took off. It wasn't working

because I was putting my hand in it too much. When I let the kids make decisions about the direction of their study, then what they already knew and what they wanted to know became apparent. I could only see the outside or surface knowledge in the beginning and, as a result, my plans didn't meet the kids needs. They had so much more inside that took them in other directions."

Learning teams provide a kind of buffer zone between the perceived curriculum (text, syllabus, teacher lectures) and the actual curriculum (what really happens in the way of learning). What students expect to happen in a college classroom and what needs to be happening to support student interaction and ownership of the learning are often two very different things. Students often feel that the teacher should be lecturing, given all important information, and generally controlling the learning environrment. Obviously, the teacher has the ultimate responsiblity for course content and evaluation, but acknowledgement of students needs, interests, and self- and peer evaluation serve to broaden the scope of any course.

Learning Teams: How do They Operate?

Learning teams are a curricular structure--long term groupings--which allows students to develop and generate knowledge, to ask questions in the relative safety of a small peer group. Learning teams' discussions of ideas and concerns with trusted individuals who are grappling with similar concerns provide a forum for new insights and group generated knowledge. A strong, vital social learning community develops as students recognize and value peer interaction. We have developed a six point process for the development of the teams.

1. Students choose teams of four or five.

Initially, it is important that the students choose at least some of their own members. Few of our students have worked in teams prior to our college classes and it is important that a sense of trust and rapport develop as soon as possible in the semester. Therefore, if students choose their own teams, they are morely likely to join with friends and acquaintances who can be supportive early on. We have found that an optimum number of members is four or five. Fewer than four in a group allows too little input and above five provides too little time for adequate participation by all members.

2. Students determine criteria for successful teamwork.

On the first day of team work, we ask students in their teams to generate and refine a list of criteria which will guide and help them to evaluate their team work. Typically, our question to them is, "What rules or tenets will make your team the best it can be? In addition to requiring students to actually think about the aspect of team effort, this step promotes team membership and responsibility for their own learning.

3. Students read professional and content area literature in literature circles.

For this portion of the course, students read assigned and chosen texts in their groups. Daily discussion in small groups promotes sharing of personal learning strategies and ways of questioning and self-monitoring.

4. Students use a process writing approach in teams for course assignments.

Writing assignments may be related to personal or public writing. For example, students may write family stories if the social studies focus unit is "The Power of Family." They may respond to a professional text by writing a critique or a letter to the author of the book. Student may then choose to bring draft pieces of writing to their teams for feedback, suggested revisions or initial editing.

5. Students use a number of strategies provided by the instructors for group interactions.

Because they have little experience in team work, we initially provide our students with some fairly structured methods of team interaction. They may, for example, use "reader response notes" (Post-it Notes throughout the text with comments, questions, vocabulary, related stories and so forth) for discussion of the reading assignment they have given themselves.

6. Students use teams for short daily discussion groups, peer teaching.

Beyond the process reading and writing, teams function as instant small discussions groups, reflection groups for specific purposes, and supportive groups for peer teaching of course concepts and strategies they are learning.

Students' written reflections on this six point process have helped us to see its value. The value of reflection for the learner has been widely written about (Schon, 1987). In our classes, weekly student reflections provided students and instructors with an on-going commentary related to learning and the sources of that learning. Some of the prompts for these reflections were:

- What did I learn this week?
- How did I learn it or from whom did I learn it?
- What supports my learning?
- What hinders it?

New views of the knowledge base and of students as knowledge generators occurred when students recognized multiple sources of knowledge and their own roles in the development and assimilation of that knowledge. Specifically, students reported the following benefits of working in learning teams:

1. Increased confidence in themselves as competent learners.
2. Increased learning because of the variety of perspectives on the topic.
3. Increased motivation for accomplishing tasks and learning material.
4. Peer explanations often carrry more "weight" than professors because they understand their levels of knowledge assimilation.
5. Security of group allows them to learn because they are less fearful of being wrong, therefore, they speak more freely and and are more willing to debate and refine their arguements.
5. Increased students 'voice', much more talk time, higher (100%) percentage of participation.
6. Students receive immediate feedback from peers.

Teaching: Is it Transmitting or Facilitating?

What is the most effective role of the classroom teacher? Lecturer? Questioner? Partner in research? Facilitator? Creator of stimulating environments? Practically speaking, a teacher adopts all of these roles; however, it is the role of the facilitator which has most intrigued us as we have worked with learning teams. What does the teacher do while students are in learning teams? In many classrooms, we have seen teachers join groups. Though once in a while we do join our groups, we most often circulate and take notes on the learning process. We record students' comments, interesting dialogue, questions and we note the group dymanics. We then facilitate a discussion of the day's

learning with the whole group. Although we are not lecturing during these group times, we are not passive observers of our students. We are actively engaged in reflecting their learning back to them for critique and evaluation. This recording and replay phase helps us to plan the next steps in the coursework, based on the students' current learning. Learning teams have benefits for us, as professors:

1. The learning team is a generic curriculum structure adaptable to many content areas and learning situations.
2. Teamwork frees us for reflective observation; we get to hear and see the learning in progress. It is learning made visible.
3. Learning teams increase our sense of efficacy.
4. Learning teams help us negotiate the curriculum and see 'next' steps.

References

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